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## The 30<sup>th</sup> Ode of Solomon as the oldest example of the great Syriac poetry and the development of Syriac prosody

The famous collection of the Odes of Solomon consisted originally of 42 psalms. Unfortunately, their full version has survived in none of the four extant manuscripts, i.e., two Syriac, one Greek and one Coptic. Ode 2 is still missing as well as the beginning of Ode 3 and probably the passages of Ode 1, which is known only in the Coptic version.

### Original Language and Date of Composition of the Odes of Solomon

They are believed to have originated in either Antioch or Edessa and were, according to what is being agreed upon by many scholars, written originally in Syriac. The evidence for this is very strong and is based on what has been called “the attractive quality of the extant Syriac.”<sup>1</sup> All scholars believe the Odes to be Christian and even to be the “earliest Christian hymn-book.”<sup>2</sup> Most

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<sup>1</sup> “Most importantly the attractive quality of the extant Syriac is indicative that Syriac is probably the original language. Of special note is the play on words possible only in Syriac [...] and the pervasive assonance, metrical scheme, and rhythm in the Syriac. Also numerous variants between extant versions are frequently explained by the assumption of a Syriac tradition of transmission” (*The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2: *Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, ed. by J. H. Charlesworth, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Auckland 1985, p. 726). Cf. *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, re-edited for the Governors of the John Rylands Library by Rendel Harris and Alphonse Mingana, vol. 2: *The Translation. With Introduction and Notes*, Manchester-London-New York-Bombay-Calcutta-Madras 1920, pp. 61–69, 91–105.

<sup>2</sup> *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 725.

scholars also agree that the Odes were probably composed sometime around A. D. 100, i.e., at the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A. D.<sup>3</sup>

The Odes could be perceived as the earliest known substantial piece of Syriac literature, preceding the text of the Peshitta, which probably originated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A. D. At least two fragments of our collection (Odes 7:10 and 9:8f.) are apparently based on the Septuagint used at that time even in Judeo-Christian communities.<sup>4</sup> We know that the Syriac-speaking church used the Peshitta, which was translated from the Hebrew independently of the Septuagint. If the original language of the Odes is Syriac, and the Biblical references indicate the Greek text of the Bible as a basis, we incline to the view that the text of the Odes predates the Peshitta. If it weren't so, we would expect to find references to the Syriac version of the Old Testament.

Some of the scholars saw the Odes as a product of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Gnosticism because of the frequent use of the word ܐܝܕܐ *īda* 'īā – knowledge, and the phrase found in Ode 8:21: ܡܝܫܝܚܐ ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܝܩܐ *wap̄riqē bhaw dat̄preq* – saved in him who was saved,<sup>5</sup> treated as a reference to the Gnostic term *salvator salvandus*.<sup>6</sup>

James H. Charlesworth refuses to accept the Gnosticism of the Odes: “intensive research on this document [manuscript N – PWT] convinced many scholars that the Odes are not gnostic but a collection of very early Christian hymns. [...] In the line with the consensus that these Odes are Christian is the observation that the key characteristic in these hymns is a joyous tone of thanksgiving for the advent of the Messiah who had been promised [...] and for the present experience of eternal life and love from and for the Beloved.”<sup>7</sup>

The author of these hymns of praise and devotion, known as the Odist, was most probably Judeo-Christian, or a Jewish convert to Christianity, who knew the Thanksgiving Hymns of the Qumran Community and believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “The extensive and pervasive parallels with the Qumran Hodayoth, the undeniable similarities with the ideas found in the Gospel of John that cannot be explained away by either the hypothesis that they are dependent upon John or that John depends upon them, and the possibility that Ignatius of Antioch may have known and even quoted from cumulatively indicate that the Odes were probably composed sometimes around A. D. 100” (*The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 727).

<sup>4</sup> *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 726.

<sup>5</sup> *The Odes of Solomon*, edited with translation and notes by J. H. Charlesworth, Oxford 1973, pp. 41, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K. Rudolph, *Gnoza. Istota i historia późnoantycznej formacji religijnej* [*Gnosis. The Nature and History of Gnosticism*], przeł. G. Sowiński, Kraków 1995, pp. 116–118.

<sup>7</sup> *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 725.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## Text of Ode 30 and its structure

I have chosen Ode 30 to illustrate some distinguishing prosodic characteristics of this literary genre. The following text is a copy of a facsimile of the manuscript attached to the Rendel Harris and Alfonse Mingana edition.<sup>9</sup> The manuscript, known as manuscript H, although it comes from the fifteenth century, is a good copy of a text coming from the reliable source. If we compare the badly preserved manuscript N, almost five centuries older than manuscript H, we'll find no variants in the text of Ode 30.<sup>10</sup> Our copy was made in 'estrangēlā script.<sup>11</sup>

ܐܘܨܝܘܢܐ ܕܥܠܝܘܬܐ  
 1 ܕܠܗ ܠܚܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ. ܕܗ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ:  
 2 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 3 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 4 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 5 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
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 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 7 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.  
 ܕܥܘܢܐ ܕܥܘܢܐ.

*zammīrtā d̄tlātīn*

*1 mlaw lkōn mayyā men mabbō'ā ḥayyā dmāryā  
 meṭṭul detptah lkōn.*

*2 w̄taw kulḳōn ṣḥayyā wsab maštyā  
 wettnīḥ 'al mabbō'eh dmāryā.*

*3 meṭṭul dšappīrū wanqed  
 wamnīḥ napšā.*

<sup>9</sup> *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, re-edited by R. Harris and A. Mingana, vol. 1: *The Text. With facsimile reproductions*, Manchester-London-New York-Bombay-Calcutta-Madras 1916, pp. \*23a–\*23b. The pages contain written *in extenso* texts of Odes 29: 10–30: 6 and 30: 6–31: 6, respectively.

<sup>10</sup> *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 4; *The Odes of Solomon*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 6–8, 12–13. “It is surprising that there are no variants between Syriac manuscripts in this Ode” (*The Odes of Solomon*, op. cit., p. 115).

<sup>11</sup> Although the text of manuscript H is preserved in the *serṭō* script, it contains mainly the oldest diacritic marks (used in non-vocalized texts). There are to be found also some vocalic signs typical for the East-Syriac system of writing.











Regardless of the critical tone of the text, St. Ephrem left us crucial information concerning the artistic work of Bardaisan. He composed hymns, songs and psalms following a specific pattern and meter. Though nearly all his works have perished, we can attribute the authorship of at least a few quotations to Bardaisan, preserved in the writings of Theodor Bar Koni (the 8<sup>th</sup> century).

I quote as an example the two following lines:<sup>28</sup>

ܠܥܝܢܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ  
ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ ܕܥܝܠܐ

*'etpaṣḥat 'ā'ar bḡawwāh | wahwā šelyā wnawhā*  
*weštabbah māryā bḥekmteh wselqaṭ tawdītā lahnāneh.*

“The air rejoiced in it, and there was quietness and serenity.

The Lord was glorified in his wisdom, and thanks were given for his mercy.”<sup>29</sup>

Here is the metrical pattern of that stanza:

— ' — ' — ' — ' || — ' — ' — ' (7+6) [3+3]

— ' — ' — ' — ' || — ' — ' — ' — ' (7+8) [3+3]

The lines are not isosyllabic, there is a caesura in each line, and the metrical pattern is based on three ictuses per half-verse (hemistich) 3+3. The peculiarity of the Bardaisan's verse would consist of the regularity of caesura and the fixed number of ictuses. His poetical works would, therefore, represent a transitional period from the heterosyllabic pattern based on the almost fixed number of ictuses to the regular isosyllabic verse, represented by the works of St. Ephrem.

Kathleen E. Mcvey, reviewing the arguments of Beck concerning the Bardaisan's method of composing *didactic songs* (ܡܕܪܐܫܐ *madrāšē*), argues that according to St. Ephrem's sermon (mentioned above), the novelty of Bardaisan's *didactic songs* was that no one had previously written this genre to be sung. As far as his psalms are concerned, he introduced greater metric regularity (most probably isosyllabic lines) to that song form.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the contradiction between Theodor bar Koni's traditional point of view and the testimony coming from St. Ephrem is only apparent; no one required from Bardaisan to abstain from writing in other traditional forms of song.<sup>31</sup>

St. Ephrem himself speaks in favor of that opinion. His 65. *didactic song* (ܡܕܪܐܫܐ *madrāšā*) from the cycle *Adversus scrutatores* (Against Scrutators) ends with following remark: ܫܠܡ ܫܒܐܬܐ ܥܣܪ

<sup>28</sup> After *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 128. The transcription following all Syriac texts in this paper is mine.

<sup>29</sup> My translation differs from that of Harris and Mingana, “The air rejoiced in it: And there was quiet and rest, And the Lord was glorified in His wisdom, And thanks mounted to His grace” (*The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 128).

<sup>30</sup> K. E. Mcvey, *Were the earliest madrāšē songs or recitations?*, [in:] *After Bardaisan. Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in Honour of Professor Han J. W. Drijvers*, ed. by G. J. Reinink and A. C. Klugkist, Leuven 1999, pp. 188–190.

<sup>31</sup> Kathleen E. Mcvey, *Were the earliest madrāšē songs...*, op. cit., p. 190.

*maḡrāsīn* ‘*al qālē ḡšīraw dbardaysān* – [here] end the didactic songs according to the melodies of Bardaisan’s songs<sup>32</sup>. If the remark comes from St. Ephrem himself, we have another proof that Bardaisan used the pentasyllabic meter in his poetical works because those *maḡrāsē* (XLIX–XLV) are composed in that pattern. It is enough to have a close look at the structure of the mentioned songs.<sup>33</sup>

The accurate isosyllabic pattern could have been introduced to the Syriac poetry by Bardaisan’s son, Harmonius, a continuator of his father’s literary activity.<sup>34</sup> A Byzantine historian of the Church, Hermias Sozomen (Σωζομενὸς Ἐρμιάς), writing in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, dedicated a long passage to an alleged Hellenic based influence of Harmonius on Syriac poetry and hymnody:

Ἀρμόνιος ὁ Βαρδησιάνου παῖς· [...] διὰ τῶν παρ’ Ἑλλησι λόγον ἀχθέντα, πρῶτον μέτροις καὶ νόμοις μουσικοῖς τὴν πάτριον φωνὴν ὑπαγαγεῖν, καὶ χοροῖς παραδοῦναι, [...] Ἰδὼν δὲ Ἐφραῖμ κηλουμένους τοὺς Σύρους τῷ κάλλει τῶν ὀνομάτων, καὶ τῷ ῥυθμῷ τῆς μελωδίας, καὶ κατὰ τοῦτο προσεθιζομένους ὁμοίως αὐτῷ δοξάζειν, καίπερ Ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας ἄμοιρος, ἐπέστη τῇ καταλήψει τῶν Ἀρμονίου μέτρον· καὶ πρὸς τὰ μέλη τῶν ἐκείνου γραμμάτων, ἐτέρας γραφὰς συναδούσας τοῖς ἐκκλησιαστικοῖς δόγμασι συνέθηκεν· ὅποια αὐτῷ πεπόνητο ἐν θείοις ὕμνοις καὶ ἐγκωμίοις ἀπαθῶν ἀνδρῶν. Ἐξ ἐκείνου τε Σύροι κατὰ τὸν νόμον τῆς Ἀρμονίου ᾠδῆς τὰ τοῦ Ἐφραῖμ ψάλλουσιν.<sup>35</sup>

“Bardesanes [...] and Harmonius, his son. It is related that this latter was deeply versed in Grecian erudition, and was the first to subdue his native tongue to meters and musical laws; these verses he delivered to the choirs [...] When Ephraim perceived that the Syrians were charmed with the elegance of the diction and the rhythm of the melody, he became apprehensive, lest they should imbibe the same opinions; and therefore, although he was ignorant of Grecian learning, he applied himself to the understanding of the metres of Harmonius, and composed similar poems in accordance with the doctrines of the Church, and wrought also in sacred hymns and in the praises of passionless men. From

<sup>32</sup> Sancti Patris nostri Ephraem Syri opera omnia quae exstant Graece, Syriace, Latine, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 128.

<sup>33</sup> “It is a pity that the Benedictine edition did not arrange them metrically so that the measure of the verse might be at once presented to the eye. After a short examination, however, it may be ascertained that these poems are written in pentesyllable verse, i.e., each line consists of five syllables” (G. Phillips, *Syriac Grammar*, op. cit., p. 192).

<sup>34</sup> “Harmonius, the son of Bardesanes, stands next in the history of this subject, both chronologically and for his successful cultivation of sacred poetry. He is reported to have studied at Athens, and to have become well acquainted with the literature of the Greeks. Some writers have stated that he indeed was the first to compose the hymns in Syriac, and they assign to him the honours, which by an almost general consent have been assigned to his father” (G. Phillips, *Syriac Grammar*, op. cit., pp. 193–194).

<sup>35</sup> *Socrates et Sozomenus*, accurate J.-P. Migne, Lutetiae Parisiorum 1864, p. 1089 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Patrologiae Graecae, 67).

that period the Syrians sang the odes of Ephraim according to the law of the ode established by Harmonius.<sup>36</sup>

Sozomen most probably exaggerated the Greek influence on the Syriac poetry.<sup>37</sup> But his testimony is important because he acknowledged the fact that the Syriac versification had been by that time already developed.

As it was in the case of Bardaisan, we do not find many quotations of Harmonius' works. In his *Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan* St. Ephrem preserved a stanza composed by Harmonius in the heptasyllabic pattern:<sup>38</sup>

‫ ܐܘ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ ܘܗܘܐ ܐܘܠܐ  
ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ ܐܘܠܐ ‬

'ō *tešrī* 'emmā *dšattā*

'awleḏ lan *tešrī hrēṭā*

“O October,<sup>39</sup> mother of the year,

Beget us another October!”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *The ecclesiastical history of Sozomen. Comprising a history of the church from A.D. 324 to A.D. 440*, translated from the Greek with a memoir of the author, London 1855, p. 135.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the critical opinion of S. Brock, “Evidently we are dealing with an example of Greek chauvinism, which preferred to see anything good in barbarian Syriac culture – such as Ephrem’s poetry, some of it already translated into Greek by Sozomen’s day – as ultimately derivative from Greek civilization” (S. Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies*, op. cit., p. 6). “Sebastian Brock has studied Sozomen’s version of events critically and come to the conclusion (agreeing with Rubens Duval in his *Littérature syriaque* [Paris, 1899]), that he very much exaggerates the Greek influence on Syriac poetry; see his ‘Syriac and Greek hymnography, problems of origins’, *Studia Patristica* 16 = *Texte und Untersuchungen* 129 (1985), pp. 77–81, reprinted in his *Studies in Syriac Christianity* (Aldershot, 1992), ch. VI” (A. Palmer, “The Influence of Ephraim the Syrian,” *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 2 (1999) No. 1, p. 11, n. 18). Gustav Hölscher already accused Sozomen of being wrong: Harmonius could not have created Syriac versification based on the Greek pattern because the isosyllabic Syriac prosody existed earlier (G. Hölscher, *Syrische verskunst*, Leipzig 1932, pp. 1–2).

<sup>38</sup> I have copied the text in *serṭō* and provided with vocalic signs. The manuscript, written in 'estrangelā, comes from the 5<sup>th</sup> or the 6<sup>th</sup> century (*S. Ephraim's prose refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*, of which the greater part has been transcribed from the palimpsest B.M. add. 14623 and is now first published by C. W. Mitchell, vol. 2: *The discourse called “Of Domnus” and six other writings*, London 1912, p. (3), IV). It reads as follows (*S. Ephraim's prose refutations*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 223, col. 1, vs. 14–17): ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ ܐܘܠܐ | ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ ܐܘܠܐ | ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ ܐܘܠܐ | ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ ܐܘܠܐ. The expression ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ *bmaḏrāšeh* means “in his didactic song”; ܠܐܢ *lan* is an enclitic particle in the second position marking direct speech (M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon*, op. cit., p. 691).

<sup>39</sup> ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ | *tešrī* | *tešrīn qdem*, Syriac equivalent of October, first month of the Syriac year counted from the beginning of Seleucid era, i.e., from year 312 BCE. The month was followed by *tešrī* II ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ | *tešrī* | *tešrīn hrāy* (*S. Ephraim's prose refutations*, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. cxxvii–cxxviii; cf. C. Brockelmann, *Syrische Grammatik mit Paradigmen, Literatur, Chrestomathie und Glossar*, Leipzig 1981, p. 79).

<sup>40</sup> St. Ephrem explained the meaning of the stanza as follows: ܐܘܠܐ ܕܠܐܢ ܐܡܡܐ ܐܘܠܐ ܐܘܠܐ | *hānaw dēn 'al 'ammā ḏḥayyē 'emar* – he speaks then of Mother of Life (*S. Ephraim's prose refutations*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 223, col. 1, vs. 18–19).

